

# WORKSHOP REPORT: STERLING GROVE SIMCOE LAPLACE

May 7, 2016  
St. Antoine  
Sheriff's Office  
Training Center



**Our voice. Our vision.**



**EVANGELINE  
CORRIDOR  
INITIATIVE**

Funded in part by a federal **TIGER** grant

## DISTRICT

Sterling Grove – Simcoe - LaPlace

## LOCATION

St. Antoine Sheriff's Office Training Center – May 7, 2016 (10am – 1pm)

## WORKSHOP TEAM

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*Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the Author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the view of the FHWA.*

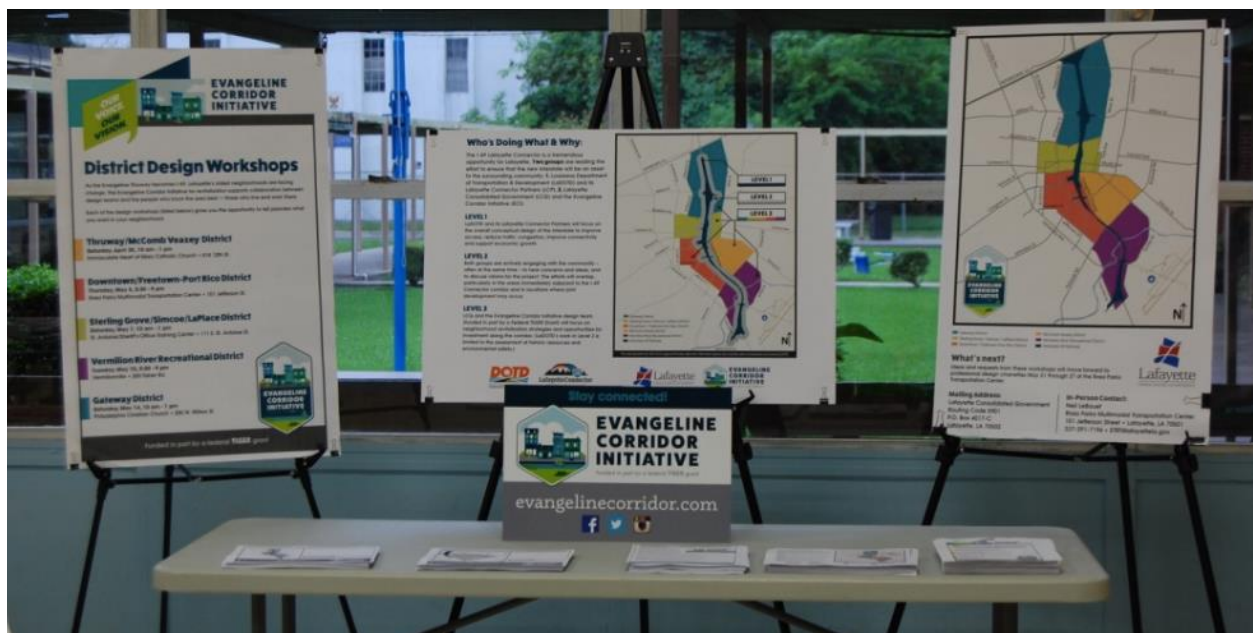
## OVERVIEW

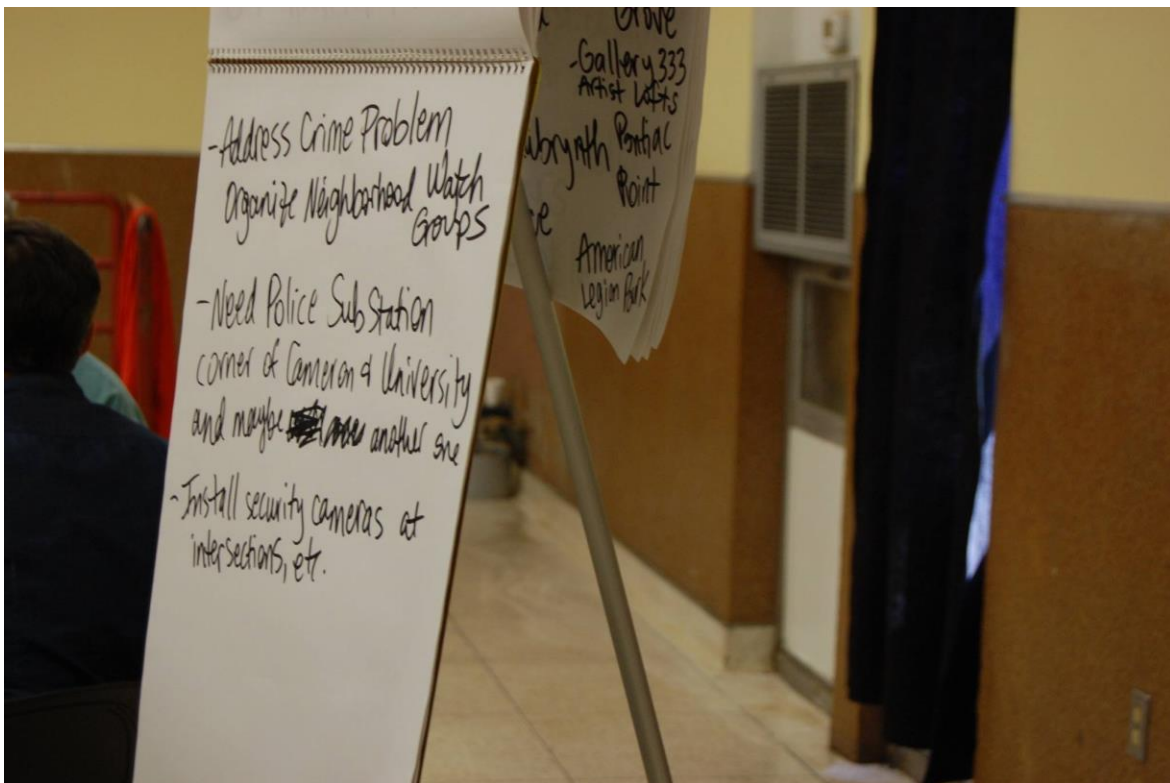
The purpose of the District Design Workshops was to bring together the communities adjacent to the existing Evangeline Thruway to lay the groundwork for developing a comprehensive future vision and plan for a renewed Evangeline Corridor. There is a great need for an extensive planning initiative to improve the districts at the neighborhood level, while linking them through a response to the unique environment that will be created by the anticipated I-49 Connector.

This Workshop Report is part of a series of five (5) district-based reports, each highlighting feedback gathered in five (5) separate 3-hour long community outreach events. The report(s) reflect the highly engaged open conversations that capture the concerns, aspirations, and suggestions that surfaced throughout various exercises led by facilitators along with groups of local neighborhood residents, business/property owners, and interested parties.

The report is divided into categories related to the overall planning effort that emerged directly from table conversations and exercises. Based around ideas of opportunities and challenges the elements include but are not limited to *economic development, culture and history, entertainment, safety, infrastructure, beautification, housing, recreation and environment and community*. A final section of the Report focuses on *Connector-Related Feedback* that serves as feedback that is collected by the ECI Team and delivered to the DOTD's Lafayette Connector Partners Team.

Lafayette Consolidated Government and the entire ECI team would like to express great appreciation to all those who participated in the workshops and shared the invaluable feedback that forms the basis of this report. The synthesized information contained herein directly informed the Charrette efforts and ultimately the plans and strategies designed for the neighborhoods and communities of each district.





ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT



Like many of the corridor districts, residents of Sterling Grove/Simcoe/LaPlace generally expressed that widespread development was something severely lacking from the area, and there were various perceptions of what kind of development should occur in the future and where it should occur. Even though the Evangeline Thruway is seen as a commercial corridor, especially to the north, many people felt that there weren't a variety of businesses in this particular area. They pointed to a lack of shopping and dining options, certainly on the local scale. Participants acknowledged the big box stores not far away (Super 1 and Walmart down the Thruway, Target down Louisiana Ave. extension towards I-10), but many residents travel even further to Breau's Mart or down Johnston (Albertson's) and Congress (Rouses) for groceries, produce and everyday goods. And though it isn't technically in the district, redevelopment of Northgate Mall was a big focus as a previously widely-used shopping destination. A majority takeaway was that more connection was needed between commercial entities and more local scale retail/food options.

There is growing sentiment among residents in this district that there is much more development attention given to the southside and residents would like to see similar economic movement. They know that development will bring job viability, but expressed that there needs to be incentives and support (tax credits) for small, locally-owned retail, especially because residents of the area are excited to shop small and will support their neighbors. More than a few people said that it was a challenge to gain loan and lending support from banks to open businesses in this area. People pointed to vacant businesses and buildings that could be transformed and reused. It was made clear that increased financial support and attention was needed to promote local business development and community.

While there was eagerness for increased development in general and especially in the LaPlace neighborhood west of the existing Thruway, there was caution about certain commercial placement. People expressed a desire to update and repurpose Jefferson Blvd from the underpass to Simcoe/Surrey. Though residents living in or near the Sterling Grove Historic District were dismayed and against dense and heavy commercial development encroaching on them – unless it was the appropriate scale and meshed with the historic character of Lafayette's oldest neighborhood. They don't wish to see hotels, gas stations or large retail. Participants agreed that new commercial development needs to respect the historic fabric while contributing to grow.

### **Desirable Elements**

- Neighborhood grocery store (needs produce and organic options)
- Farmers market
- Bike service station
- Neighborhood drug store/pharmacy
- Coffee shop with teas and vegan options (non-corporate)
- Ice cream/dessert shop
- Local shopping and retail options
- Art galleries (creative local business) (the Art Center is vacant on weekend – rent out!)
- Food trucks or pop-ups serving lunch
- Restaurants – café/bistro like the Filling Station
- Wine bar (adult bar, not nightclub)

## **SAFETY**

Safety of families and individuals, especially children is at the forefront of people's minds. Many parts of this district are deemed unsafe and crime-ridden especially at night. Precinct 1 was singled out, as was Four Corners (a historically seedy junction) and drug issues were highlighted along St. John between Sterling and McComb-Veazey neighborhoods. J. Wallace James Park has an issue with drugs and sex workers, making it an unsafe area for families. This could be attributed to a number of factors that are covered in this report, but a primary indicator was the lack of and need for increased police presence (i.e. beat cops, substations, patrol cars) as well as more security cameras. Increased street lighting and better applications of safety lighting was also discussed widely.

Beyond concerns around crime, safe streets and traffic-oriented issues were also a focus of anxiety. There was general consensus that for pedestrians and cyclists, crossing any street to reach Downtown would make someone feel uneasy and unsafe. Four Corners was again mentioned as a problem zone. Simply walking past vacant lots and abandoned cars to cross the Thruway was unappealing and unsafe. The railroad/coulee crossing near Walmart has bad visibility. It was noted that people still speed through and cut across the neighborhood past school buses and kids playing despite speed bumps in places (speed bumps were a good addition but not sure they work or there could be more).

In LaPlace, the area around the missions, specifically St. Joseph's Diner needs attention. It should be cleaned up, activated – find ways to keep the homeless from sleeping outside around it.

#### **Desirable Elements**

- Add a police substation in LaPlace area – increase street patrols
- Organize a neighborhood watch (and security cameras)
- Street lights (functional and aesthetic)
- Improve street interface (vacant lots)
- Mitigate speeding and street safety features

## **CULTURE AND HISTORY**

In an already rich cultural area, this district and Sterling Grove in particular. Sterling Grove is the oldest and perhaps most historically majestic neighborhood in Lafayette. It has been on the National Register for over 25 years and is composed of several historic homes of great architectural quality. Even lying next to under-developed, largely uninspiring and dilapidated Thruway, the core of Sterling Grove is charming, quaint, and quiet considering the immediately adjacent noise and traffic. The majority of participants expressed great pride in their homes and community neighborhood.. It has great historic value that many of the residents would like to see safeguarded and expanded upon.

St. Genevieve is a huge asset for the community and is one of the nicer architecturally significant churches in Lafayette. There are concerns of impact from the proposed interstate given its proximity and people have ideas about how its grounds could be made even more civic (see below).

An effort is underway to expand the historic district boundaries to encompass the adjacent neighborhood of Nickerson which retains its historic character, albeit at a slightly smaller, yet denser scale along Orange St. and Jefferson Blvd. As well as continuing S. Sterling towards Louisiana Ave.

Already having National Historic status, many residents would like to see increased local attention and designation.

Across the Thruway from Sterling Grove, LaPlace includes some of the city's oldest neighborhoods and is home to a growing faction of active community involvement. Although LaPlace doesn't enjoy or benefit from the level of historic architecture quality such as Sterling Grove, the area is improving along these lines with the restoration of homes and residents are noticing nearby areas that are gaining or potentially being considered for national or local historic status.

#### **Desirable Elements**

- Some Sterling Grove residents mentioned desire to be recognized by the city for local historic preservation designation and expressed concerns regarding current commercial zoning and impact on potential development
- More street sign designation of historic areas – historical markers
- Underpass should be painted to highlight cultural icons/talent
- Expand and take advantage of tourism perspective and historical value
- Continue historic walk and events in Sterling Grove and possibly expand to other areas
- Insert a Museum or community destination

## **RECREATION, NATURAL ENVIRONMENT**

Virtually all participants acknowledged the value and need for functional recreation options and nice parks of diverse uses and wanted to see existing places improved and expanded. The district and adjacent area are already home to substantial park destinations and recreation facilities such as City Park (municipal golf course), Clark Field, Domingue Center, O.J. Mouton Pool, American Legion Park and Pontiac Point-- though it was generally felt that most of those were underperforming and in need of attention or upgrade. City Park, for example, is not exactly viewed as a park in the traditional sense as it is really a golf course (albeit a well-maintained and used public amenity in the area). People expressed that it could be made more diverse with the addition of a walking trail around or through the golf course. The Domingue Center, O.J. Mouton Pool and Clark Field could be updated and once again made a focus of the neighborhood and adjacent communities. This 'campus' was seen as a major opportunity for kids programs. Residents of LaPlace mentioned the desire for more recreational options (i.e. Boys & Girls Club, YMCA, basketball, swimming pool).

Much was said about the state of American Legion Park. People generally thought it was a nice park, but highlighted need for improvements to cleanliness in spots, sidewalks, sewers instead of ditches and pointed to the fact that there is an influx and issue of homelessness especially in the evening. A similar concern was had for Pontiac Point – a historically rich and frequented area that has, in some people's minds, become more unsafe or less appealing in recent years, possibly due to homeless issues. People called for more connections to these parks through bike trails and walking trails (Elizabeth to Sterling, St. Charles and Orange to Pontiac Point, and Simcoe to LaPlace and American Legion Park).

#### **Desirable Elements**

- More green space - helps reduce and change pollution and beautifies (abandoned lot potential)
- Community gardens and pavilion (events and recreation) – St. Charles(?)
- Dog park and fountain

- Food Park and fruit trees - benefit community and homeless population
- Place for elderly people
- St. Genevieve pavilion and civic plaza
- Skate park (one near LaPlace already)
- The Greenhouse needs to be maintained
- Mature trees and vegetation
- Plaza in front of St. Genevieve – a similar green space
- Using the coulee – cover for a bike path, park/urban forest

## COMMUNITY

The neighborhoods in this district on both sides of the existing Thruway have a very strong sense of community pride, but there is a debatable mix between positive and negative perceptions, and it can always be expanded and improved upon in terms of community assets and amenities.

### **SOME WORDS TO DESCRIBE THE COMMUNITY**

- Charming
- Welcoming
- Diverse – economically, racially, politically
- Unique
- Dynamic
- Passionate
- Neglected, overlooked
- Vulnerable
- Subtle/Quiet/Peaceful
- Diamond in the rough
- Police are friendly
- Spacious
- Family Oriented
- Traditional
- Multi-generational
- Inclusive
- Litter
- Abandoned
- Blighted
- Disconnected

The diversity of the area, especially around Jefferson Blvd. was discussed and there are certainly a mixture of people and backgrounds in this district. Many of the highlighted ideas and concerns revolving around community coincide with values of the natural environment and recreational options. Amenities such as tennis courts, pool, and Boys & Girls clubs were mentioned (see other sections). They already use the club on Willow St. and areas around the Domingue Center and Clark Field. Neighborhood hubs for the community to gather were a focus point – they could have multiple uses (Pink Turtle on Mudd Ave. is gone – add a community center in front of the O.J. Mouton pool).



Conversations also focused on basic services (lack thereof) and amplified offerings the community would like to see. Options for healthcare and hospitals were very important. All of the doctors, medical facilities, and urgent care clinics are outside of the district. It's difficult to cross Jefferson to reach downtown – would go more often if it was easier and more inviting.

#### **Desirable Elements (and local assets to keep)**

- St. Genevieve Church and School
- St. Paul Church
- Moss Annex – alternative school
- Boys & Girls Club
- Art Gallery – Gallery 333, artist lofts
- Family activity outdoor/indoor
- Family oriented 50/50 business
- Child-care
- Love the art warehouse (LPTFA)
- Recreation center (YMCA)
- Senior citizen activity center
- A neighborhood museum - celebrate identity and history
- Want to see more renovated spaces that keep the character of neighborhood (111 Monroe St.)
- A community center in LaPlace
- Christmas decorations on light posts – doesn't have
- Community bathroom/showers would be nice
- Movie theater and other forms of entertainment

## **HOUSING**

The value of the Sterling Grove Historic District was predominately mentioned in many conversations around housing in this area. Concerns there have been echoed in terms of wanting new development and new housing to fit in with the existing context and scale. Typical apartment complexes are not welcomed, though there is stereotype and debate around the nature of apartments. Though not as stately, the communities and “Fightingville” and Goldman St. to the north take great pride in their homes. While Sterling Grove emphasizes their status as a historic district that warrants protection and has perhaps been neglected, Simcoe and LaPlace to the west of the existing Thruway have a different outlook and challenge. Diverse and with largely low-income families, the area suffers in some spots from dilapidation, vacant lots and abandoned houses. It is estimated that there are approximately more than 60 adjudicated properties in LaPlace.

Homelessness is also a big issue in LaPlace that needs to be addressed. A few shelters are located in this area which contributes to the gathering of homeless individuals in this area and there are concerns that an overpass would exacerbate this.

#### **Desirable Elements**

- Community bathroom/shower for the homeless
- Better maintenance of homes in the area
- Variety of housing - single family residential, mixed- use housing and multi-use buildings
- Home ownership assistance for the elderly and lower income families – appropriately designed

- Habitat for Humanity presence (similar to McComb-Veazey, maybe Tiny House concepts)

## BEAUTIFICATION

Though some parts of Sterling Grove and the adjacent streets are lined with grand trees and lush private landscaping, it was generally thought that the area was severely underperforming in terms of appearance. Lots owned by the city are considered a problem as they have overgrown grass – felt the city should be more responsible and quicker for maintenance of lots and mowing the sidewalk area. There is trash all along Moss St. though it was said that it wasn't the neighborhood's trash. Again adjudicated properties and abandoned lots abound and need to be addressed to promote neighborhood pride. It was mentioned that we need to get rid of dumpsters and old useless cars left in front yards. Homes and lots around Willow and Moss Sts. to Louisiana Ave. have many rundown properties.

Particular concern and highlights were the abandoned LUS water well property near Cameron and S. Pierce Sts. and around the old railroad tracks between Cameron and Monroe Sts. There are concerns about pollution that may be exacerbated by interstate construction and issues with connectivity because Buchanan St. is the only cross street through the area. There was also a question about whether or not the toxic materials at this site could spread to surrounding backyards, properties, and the aquifer.

### Desirable Elements

Need better sidewalks and be more pedestrian-friendly  
 Replacing street lights that are burnt out (add additional lighting for visibility and safety)  
 Street sweeping to address trash build-up  
 Large scale landscaping (i.e. dogwood trees on Mudd Ave.)

*"We want green space or an urban forest...no buildings...to mitigate the sound."*

## INFRASTRUCTURE

As is much the case in neighborhoods surrounding the corridor, the road and streetscape conditions are mediocre at best. Sidewalks, when they exist, are broken and not maintained. They should be improved to create appeal and walkability functions. There are a number of ditches of various sizes in the area which were accused of being eyesores and not functioning properly as drainage facilities (sewage problems and open ditch situations). Expressed was a need for more culverts rather than ditches that are left to wither. In terms of streetscapes, there was general thoughts regarding burying utilities such as electric and phone lines. But there should be an increase in street lighting (see safety above).

In regard to safety and infrastructure, it was noted that there is actually a decent amount of large truck traffic down S. Pierce St. in LaPlace – an otherwise quaint and appealing neighborhood street. There could be more traffic calming measures here as well as across the Thruway on St. Charles St. where speed limits could potentially be lowered. There were multiple mentions of speed and "abuse" of local neighborhood streets for through-traffic.

### Desirable Elements

- Traffic calming measures to address speed issues

- Improved drainage – ditch upgrading
- Improved sidewalk conditions
- Bury utilities and enhance street lighting

## ACCESS/MOBILITY/CONNECTIVITY

Connectivity and access are again the main concerns on most people's minds. The existing Thruway has largely cut off the neighborhoods to the east from downtown and the rest of the city, while Congress St. prevents comfortable access for pedestrians and traffic hoping to enter downtown from the north. The railroad was an obstacle for some, but for the most part they either circumvent it by using the Jefferson St. underpass or they do try to cross it further north in LaPlace. The Buchanan Street railroad crossing does not have a crossing sign which can make people very nervous and unsafe. It was said that Mudd Ave. and Simcoe St. were the only decent rail crossing, but this was up for debate.

In terms of access, it was suggested that downtown should extend and bleed down Jefferson Blvd. to Simcoe St. to reach Pontiac Point. People felt that a redesign (revitalize the road surface) and reconnection of Jefferson St. across Thruway and match Cypress St.. It was suggested that roundabouts be considered on Moss St. and Mudd Ave. and at the Jefferson/Moss intersection and Surrey/Simcoe. This would reduce and slow traffic as well as hopefully address and reduce cut-through traffic.

Mobility is also at the forefront of residents' minds. The increase in cycling and thinking about biking as a legitimate mode of travel has taken place, especially in LaPlace. It was suggested that on Mudd Ave. across the Thruway that the turning lane be removed in favor of a bike lane. Public bus use is a big topic for people living nearby Sterling Grove and also for residents of LaPlace. The bus and public transportation system needs a lot of work – more bus routes, covered bus stops, and stops with benches. Most stops in the neighborhood are just poles. Bus shelters for school kids is key! Demarcated crosswalks are necessary throughout the neighborhoods – they make walking safer. Linking Nickerson and Sterling is a big desire.

Accessibility for handicapped individuals is a concern. Already not easy to navigate around – sidewalks should be improved to accommodate! And handicap access to the park at Pontiac Point (Jefferson and Simcoe).

### Desirable Elements

- Bus Shelters for school kids! - Better bus stops in general!
- Need more opportunities for transportation
- Handicap accessibility
- Additional bus stations and routes (near Northgate Mall) – express routes to come?
- Features to promote Thruway crossing and between neighborhoods - crosswalks b/w Nickerson/Sterling

*“Officially became the wrong side of the tracks when the Thruway came through.”*

*“If downtown were more accessible, then a lot of the challenges would be eliminated.”*

## CONNECTOR-RELATED FEEDBACK

## NOTES ON THE EVANGELINE THRUWAY (EXISTING & FUTURE USE)

### Challenges, Concerns, and Existing Use

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*Question: What are your major routes to work, school, etc?*

- Most take Mudd, Simcoe, Louisiana, and Moss as well as the Thruway. They all noted they try to avoid Johnston due to congestion.
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*Question: How would your ideal Evangeline Thruway look and function?*

- Residents don't want to see the Thruway as a three-lane road. They were suggestions of two lanes with a landscaped media and ample lighting.
  - They want to see programs and incentives to help relocate and bring businesses onto Thruway after interstate construction.
  - They don't want this area to be a haven for the homeless.
  - Would like the Thruway to become a grand boulevard with featured roadway with streetscape, etc. and mixed use commercial/residential.
  - Change and remove land pollution along the railroad. Clean up pollution near tracks on second St. going into downtown (Vermilion, Taft, Jefferson) – industrial section.
  - "They already cut us in half when they built the Evangeline Thruway".
  - Lighting under the Jefferson underpass.
  - Railroad horn is a nuisance – make it a no blow zone please!
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## NOTES ON THE PROPOSED CONNECTOR

*Question: Do you have other concerns about the connector?*

- Many residents were concerned about homes and businesses that would have to be moved or destroyed to make way for connector. They also specifically mentioned the fear that many employees would lose their jobs and many business owners would go out of business by not being offered enough money from the state to move.
- There were also concerns about depreciation of property value following the interstate.
- Concerns were reiterated about the pollution and toxins that would be exposed to workers and residents if building begins before waste sites and abandoned sites have been cleaned.
- The safety of the interstate was a large concern. This including air and noise pollution as well as flying parts or hazardous materials after wrecks.
- Noise pollution and exit ramps into the historic neighborhood were also concerns.
- Concerns about truck routes and interstate exit ramps in Sterling Grove.
- An underpass killing the area is a concern.
- Anything under the interstate is a big attraction for crime and homelessness. Basketball court could come later, but would people actually use it?
- Lower bridge height encourages homelessness.
- Like the depressed option so there is more green space and more connectivity.
- We have to develop the area right up to the interstate the right way. Maybe a plaza?
- Boulevard at grade versus elevated interstate - rather see on-grade connector.
- Move slip ramps to Donlon and add landscaping - set slip ramps away from neighborhoods
- Do not want a heavy commercial area! Would like to block out the sound of the connector with an urban forest.